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**Philosophical reflections
on the Cartoon Controversy**

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Content

Prelude	4
The Core of the Cartoon Controversy	4
On modernity and the Islamic state.....	6
The Cartoon Controversy and the international law	8
The crucial question	9
Epilogue	10

Prelude

The latest events in the wake of the now famous cartoons in a large provincial newspaper necessitate that we both as a society and as individuals reflect over what has happened so as to motivate and mobilize a popular reaction against every attempt to create fascistic, fundamentalist or medieval conditions in Denmark.

“The normal course of events includes all the individual incidents”, said Montesquieu, the French philosopher of the Enlightenment. Recent events, with flag-burning, violent demonstrations, and mendacity at national and international levels, show the lack of ability of our society to understand and deal with the political problems that time actualizes. Consideration of the general causes of these conflicts points to a common decline in political thinking. Two frames of mind are crucial to this experience of decline: trust that reason is capable of solving the greatest problems of our time, and despondency over the fact that it still has not succeeded, for which reason we reluctantly put our trust in the protection which our military superiority over the enemy can give. These moods, however, are neither new nor specific to our time as they are based on the condition of being a human being – a being with a consciousness of self and a consequent loss of animal innocence and feeling of security that now constantly strives to regain innocence and security in a personal religious, moral and societal world. An important reason for the success of the fundamentalist movement in recent years can be found precisely in their ideal of realizing such an innocent morality in the world with the help of terror and violence.

The Core of the Cartoon Controversy

The list of countries that demand an apology from the Danish government and the Danish Newspaper Jyllands-Posten are embellished with names such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya, which compete for the title of being the most perverse, despotic and misanthropic regime in the world with an iron grip on society, run as a family concern, and where every attempt to construct a civil society is repressed. A viable civil society will build up alternatives to the regime’s ideal, about how citizens may live their lives with personal participation and influence in society in the form of voluntary organizations, social movements, professional and political organizations in addition to

intercultural communication. A large part of the recent commotion in the Middle East about how the Danish government ought to act in relation to the newspaper is caused by precisely the lack of distinction between governmental opinion and the utterances and wishes of the civil society in the Arabic world. A citizen in Saudi Arabia or another country in the region experiences the mass media as the mouthpiece of the regime and thus cannot understand that the Danish government does not have the powers to make the paper toe the line. Arabic citizens have never been allowed to be private and independent consumers, but are constantly kept under surveillance and control by the state authority. Nothing is allowed to happen unless approved by those who hold power; neither could the current boycott have arisen without the seal of approval from the dictator state. The most important reason for the tremendous social, cultural and political problems in the Middle East is precisely these forms of rule, which grossly neglect this unhappy area of the world. So long as these regimes are allowed to stay in power and do as they please there will be a gulf and barrier to real dialogue and the people of the Middle East will be at the mercy of the despot.

But our problem in democratic countries is that even a military victory over those regimes (and the Fundamentalists movements) only shows that which it factually demonstrates: that one power is superior to the other. Superiority can, of course, be grounded in philosophical insight, moral wisdom and statesmanship; but if this is the case, it must be by virtue of real ability in these areas and not because of a display of brilliance in the art of war. A monopoly on the mass destructions weapons can coincide with a monopoly on virtue, but there is no law of necessity that makes this obvious. The very fact that democratic countries could completely misunderstand the intellectual, political and moral challenge of fundamentalism and be driven to the brink of disaster by the selfsame forces which they had stood shoulder to shoulder with on the battlefield a few years ago (in Afghanistan, Iraq etc), and with whom they form strategic alliances in several countries in the Middle East (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, etc), should raise doubts about the truth of this line of thought, morals and statesmanship. The very materialization of fundamentalism, not only in the Middle East but also in the very heart of the democratic countries, should convince us that the idea of progress and peace, in the light of the lessons of the last century and our naïve optimism in the post-soviet period, has become a memory of the past.

Unfortunately, the cartoons in Jyllands-Posten have achieved what no ruler in the Middle East even in his wildest dreams could imagine: to unite the people around the regime, which thus can appear as the champion of dignity and bliss. These cartoons come at a most convenient time for the regimes in the Middle East. After many years on the defensive with increasing pressure from the West about large political and social reforms and concessions, these regimes find the times opportune for a well-organized confrontation with the West. Furthermore, they seek legitimacy among their populations by presenting themselves as the champion of Islam.

That these rulers pass themselves off as defenders of the dignity of the founder of Islam must be outrageous to every Muslim who values dignity. There is no doubt that the prophet Muhammed appears as the greatest person, in line with the prophets Moses and Jesus, in the Islamic self-concept. Against this background it is nothing less than a disgrace that the worst of the Middle Eastern gangs of criminals pretend to protect the honour of the prophet Muhammed. It would be the equivalent of Hitler, Himmler or Stalin demanding an apology for affronting the prophet Jesus.

The various Islamic religious communities demand that Islam's religious symbols be treated with dignity. There is nothing fundamentally peculiar about this as everyone who holds a figure or symbol dear is hurt at any form of disrespect. But let us turn the issue around. With what degree of

dignity do these groups and their representatives appear in the media? To demand respect for oneself and one's religion presupposes that in turn one shows the greatest respect for the opponent. Without this premise, without behaving respectfully in relation to the others, this demand is either an expression of lack of judgement or lack of self-respect.

When another Danish newspaper, Ekstrabladet, confronted the prayer-leader Mr Laban (member of board of the Islamic Religious Community in Copenhagen) with the actual number of 15,000 protest signatories against the Cartoons instead of the postulated 200,000, his answer was that this number was an expression of the truth plus value added tax. At a lighter time this subtle reply could raise a smile from anyone with a sense of humour, but in this grave situation this statement testifies to Mr Laban's lack of judgement. The answer is a downright lie. As is known, the first thing that is renounced by the lie is oneself, as the lie reveals the lack of courage of one's own convictions.

The proposal that this gentleman and his associates in the Islamic Religious Community in Copenhagen argue for is no solution. On the contrary, their proposed solution and their attempts at being spokesman for a quite inhomogeneous group must be regarded as part of the problem; to make agreements with these groups on the basis they propose is nothing less than a suspension of the democratic conception of law, something which must be fought against with every available democratic means.

The Islamic religious community and associated groups are attempting to elevate religious ideas to relevant and valid arguments in issues concerning organization of the public arena. But this undermines humanism and its fundamental idea about human dignity and the ideal of secularity. The curious thing about the wish for more religion in the public arena is the very fact that many of those people with roots in Muslim countries and now resident here have fled from dictatorships, a lack of democracy and a non-existent freedom of speech. One can, of course, invoke human rights, especially the article on freedom of religion, but quite honestly if religion really were the most important factor in the choice of where people live then it would be much more natural for a committed Muslim to live in one of the many Muslim countries. If the cultural and religious differences among these very devout and religious people make it difficult to develop a coherent and harmonic relationship with the surrounding society and its common set of values, the solution must be to leave the country. Cultural diversity does not mean that every old-fashioned, misanthropic cultural manifestation should be allowed, but rather that no culture can hide away and turn a blind eye to critical dialogue. The consequences of actions and ideas which oppose critical dialogue can in the long run contribute to the destruction of both social cohesion and the idea of the mature citizen who has come of age in an open, tolerant and above all democratically minded society.

On modernity and the Islamic state

The word 'modernus' was used for the first time at the end of the 5th century to differentiate a present that had officially become Christian from a heathen, i.e. Roman, past. Since that time the expression has had a connotation of intentional discontinuity between the old and the new. The expression 'modern' was used again and again, each time with a different content, to express the consciousness of an era that referred back to the past of classical antiquity or to any other past which was seen as a model to be emulated. A new meaning of modernity disseminates widely from the end of the 18th century; in particular, the German philosopher Hegel explicitly points to the

radical break with tradition as a consequence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. A modern world now opposes the old in the fact that it is radically open to the future, and where the transient moment of the present forms an excellent starting point from which each generation once more must comprehend the entirety of history. History is now understood as a comprehensive process that causes problems, while time is understood as a scanty resource to overcome these problems and the increase in the number of challenging events is felt as pressure of time.

Because of its strong opposition to traditional arguments modernity must trust reason. Even in the case of the wish to emulate an idealized past, the choice of this model must be grounded in modernity's own normative sources. Cultural traditions in this way become more and more reflexive so that they can no longer merely be taken for granted. From a hypothetical perspective these traditions can be examined. To be carried on in practice requires a more or less conscious adaptation by the following generations. It is against this background that Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher *par excellence* of the Enlightenment, lets the interests of reason come together in his three famous questions: 1) What can I know? 2) What should I do? 3) What must I hope? In his third question Kant sets his sight on a uniting of the normative, the freedom of reason and the autonomous formation of the will on the one hand, and on the other hand the possible conditions for cognition. In brief, what we know and can describe must be able to tally with the way in which we have autonomy, which in turn is the condition that makes it possible we can know anything at all.

There is a crucial difference between the ideas that form the basis of the formation of the state in Europe and the ideas of the perfect state held by Muslim fundamentalists. There exists a wealth of theories of the state in Europe; a thinker such as Hobbes determines the rationale of the state to be the protection of the life of the individual, while Hegel talks about the power of the state as the concrete expression of the evacuation of the individual and collective will in mutual dependency. Carl Schmitt determines the state to be guarantor against the fear of natural conditions, whereas Lenin regards the state as the instrument of oppression used by the ruling class against the oppressed. What these thinkers have in common is that they define the state as a systematic network encompassing a wealth of relatively independent institutions, which exercise sovereign power in society through their structures of authority, and thereby regulate the mutual relations between individual members and groups. In this way, the state can have an inbuilt tendency to construct a comprehensive, patriarchal, institutional power structure to regulate and control members of the state.

In contrast, Islamic fundamentalists are only interested in the state as an organ for the preservation of a pedantic practice of a crucially important set of moral rules (in this context Sharia and Figh), which is also clearly seen in the appellation 'state' being often dropped in favour of the more original designation 'emirate' or 'caliphate'. This is of crucial significance for the lives of the people, for when the main task of the head of state is religiously formulated – to create a realm where God's word is proclaimed and where God's laws are enforced – the emir, in keeping with his self-image, must win legitimacy by ensuring that society lives in accordance with the laws that are formulated in the Koran. State politics thus becomes a significant part of the country's religious practice. A large part of the legislation therefore deals with so-called crimes against religion. This phenomenon is not, however, exclusively Islamic. The concept of crimes against religion was also a well-known phenomenon in 18th century Denmark. In the first chapter of the sixth book of Danish Law the three most serious religious crimes are set down: spreading of erroneous teachings, blasphemy and witchcraft. It is stated that those who have "censured God or blasphemed His holy

Name, Word or Sacraments” should have their tongue cut out while alive, then their head should be chopped off and set on a pole along with their blasphemous tongue. Furthermore, if the hand had been used in such a form of contempt for God, this should also be cut off while the person is alive.

The formation of the modern state in Europe, including Denmark, was therefore at times a rather bloody clash with religion’s role as the central societal institution. The project of the European Enlightenment was precisely to set people free from the grip of religion. The implementation of a similar project is still lacking in a large part of the Islamic world; on the contrary, Islamic fundamentalists are attempting to hold the people in an iron grip with terror and threat.

But it is precisely because the Islamic state, according to Islamic fundamentalists, must only take an interest in religious affairs and not bother about the welfare of its citizens that this strategy inevitably leads to economic collapse and hence the definitive collapse of the state. It is for this reason that donations from the outside world became necessary to maintain a halfway tolerable existence for the population, for example in Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, the autonomous areas in Pakistan (those areas near the Afghan border that do not recognise the authority of the central power). For the same reason, neither does the Islamic project encompass the creation of the good society, culture and happiness as its ideals, but only the promotion of destruction and death to the ideal it revolves around. Similarly, there is no embodiment of life in radical Islam but rather that of martyrdom and death. Against this background attitude to life it is understandable that the political, cultural, and religious agitation to mobilise the masses by Islamic fundamentalists only makes use of terms from the arsenal of religious negativity, such as blasphemy, God’s anger, curse, religious blindness, jihad etc. People in the grip of radical Islam are betrayed and caught in a web of ornately clad dark powers. The bloody traces of the thousands and thousands of destroyed lives are a silent witness to this tragedy. One of the latest spoor on Islamic Fundamentalism’s shameful history is the abominable murder of the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh.

The Cartoon Controversy and the international law

The Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen , EU leaders, the UN secretary-general all plead at the moment for the idea of ‘order and stability under international law’ as an alternative to international anarchy, but this ideal is only sensible on the assumption that the international sphere already contains the societal elements that determine order and peace. On this assumption, order and peace, which are naturally conditional on the world situation, would merely wait for the remedies of law to take effect. Unfortunately, none of the people stating this demand has asked whether this assumption is correct. Because they believe in the regulative ability of the law, they expect from a rational and coherent system of international law the same favourable results that national law has apparently given to democratic countries. But the ineffectiveness of international law reveals precisely the impotence of this idea. It could well be that the idea of ‘order and stability under international law’ can be subjected to a reasonable trial with good results, but it cannot be expected to work independently of social relations in a social vacuum. In a majority of national situations the law can at least be upheld as a valid rule for behaviour even though it turns out not to be sufficient in relation to the intended purpose. It is the case for a country such as Denmark that once a law comes into effect it works within the traditional framework of legal rules and law enforcement from which domestic law receives its primary vitality. At the international level there is no such framework. A rule of law that is not founded on a mutual interest with which the relevant parties can live in accordance can only be maintained as a valid rule of conduct by an incessantly

precarious balance of power. In the event of conflict, the emotional powers in loyalty and group solidarity work in favour of the domestic but in disfavour of international law. A system of international law that is not in contact with the social situation thus becomes not merely an unworkable but also an unreal institution. We are experiencing this situation now where the tyrannies of the Middle East, with Iran and Syria in the lead, show no interest in following the international norms of diplomatic conduct but rather appeal to the feelings of religious affiliation of the masses and ideas about a unitary Islamic society, the glorious past and the coming salvation, which are therefore opposed by western democracies and their conspiracies. The conspiracy deals with 'them' who wish 'us' ill, and there is thus a need for a saviour in the form of a priest, a dictator or a national father figure who can save 'us' from 'them' and either re-establish the glorious past or lead 'us' to the promised land or into a golden future. It is in this atmosphere that terror as a considered political and moral line of action can be elevated and used to achieve the wished-for result.

This conduct annuls the international system of law. We must therefore be conscious of the fact that a political problem (for example those cartoons of the prophet Muhammed), which presents itself for a ruling under international and diplomatic law, is always a particular phase in a much larger complex of problems with roots in the historic past and ramifications that reach out over the question which is made the object for legal decision. The cartoons of the prophet Muhammed are thus only a small part of the large philosophical, moral and political power struggle between a backward-looking, pre-modern form of society based on religious dogma and a freedom-oriented, open, civil interaction among free individuals.

There is no doubt that every time the international community endeavours to treat philosophical, moral and power-political problems, which present themselves as legal questions, this treatment can only occur as isolated cases in the set of international legal rules and not as particular phases in a comprehensive complex of political problems that require a comprehensive solution in keeping with political principles. The consequence is that political problems are never solved but merely cast back and forth and finally put on the shelf after the judicial rules of the game, to reappear at a later and totally unexpected time to plague the international community as a repressed spirit that returns, destroying everything in its path.

Conflicts of this type, which we experience at present, cannot be solved on the basis of laid down rules of law as it is not the established law, its interpretation and practice there is any doubt about. Seen from the diplomatic perspective what is at stake in this conflict is not who is right and who is wrong, but rather what should be done to combine the special interests of the individual countries with the common interest in peace and order. The diplomatic choice, therefore, is not between legal and illegal, but between wisdom and stupidity.

The crucial question

The questions we should rather be asking ourselves at this time are what we mean by a democratic model of society and how we as individuals should relate to the ideals that radiate from people who, foaming at the mouth with rage, demand subjugation: these people's paradise could turn out to be our hell on earth.

There has not been much criticism of religion in recent times. Even many of the old revolutionaries from 1968 have had a form of religious awakening. The atheist position, in which philosophers such

as Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx had an eye for the alienating character of religion, has been forgotten. According to them, people create God and ascribe to her/him all the best human qualities but, precisely because of this, experience themselves as wretched and sinful. It is this self-estimation that creates religious alienation. Religion likewise reflects people's own misery and powerlessness. Religion is thus nothing other than humanity's consciousness and self-image, which either has not yet become conscious of itself or has already lost itself again. But a person is not an abstract being. A person incorporates a world, a state, a society. This state and this society usually produce religion as a distorted consciousness of the world because these authorities constitute a distorted world. Religious wretchedness is therefore a simultaneous expression of and protest against the real wretchedness to be found in society. Seen in this light, religion is a beleaguered creature's sigh, a heartless world's heartfelt pity, a spiritless condition's spiritual contents. It is, as Karl Marx says, opium for the people. To revoke religion as the illusory happiness of the masses must be a part of a critique of social and societal relations in general. The criticism of religion disappoints people, yes, but it is exactly for this reason that people should begin to think and act independently in order to create reality as a disappointed being who has come to their senses. In our time, when the revival of religion is an undeniable fact, there is the greatest need for a criticism of religion. This critique must argue for an unequivocal Enlightenment position from which a critical stance to civil society must focus on the open, civil interaction between free individuals, and not a return to pre-modern conditions of communities under compulsion in the form of family honour, forced marriages, blood revenge, and assault and murder of adversaries and political opponents.

The only right thing to do in this unhappy situation is to learn from recent European history: to take a stand against the type of thought that will oppose an open, tolerant and free society. There is a need for society as a whole with a united voice to defend the right of freedom of expression and to debate sensitive issues such as religion and societal forms.

A modern society can only be based on a democratic strengthening of civil society, which presupposes a productive interplay between elements of principled reasoning, powers of rational discussion and decentralized communities and administration (associations, clubs, interest organizations etc.). It is in the latter fora that involvement in democratic politics can be roused, develop and go through the process of qualified learning. This is an integral part of the spiritual inheritance and historical conditions that have been conducive to development of the modern Danish society and as such forms the inheritance with which, for better or worse, Danish society is historically furnished.

Epilogue

In my youth I experienced a religious awakening in my fatherland, Iran. It was no pretty sight. People's dignity was so violently trampled on that it created an everlasting open sore in the soul of every person of honour in that country. At the beginning of the 1990s I had a visit from my now deceased father in Denmark. To my question about whether he and his friends continued to hold their weekly gathering with good food and whisky, he replied that they had long ago stopped meeting as they could not bear to look each other in the face because of the deep shame they felt that their beloved country had been taken over by people lacking sense, judgement, culture or conscience. In Denmark one can still look each other in the face in all conscience. Long may it continue. So apologize to religious fanatics? Not on your life.